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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 003768

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING
STATE FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/FO:ATACHCO

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: BISHOP AUDI FORESEES MAJOR CRISIS FOR
LEBANON'S CHRISTIANS

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a call on Greek Orthodox Bishop Metropolitan Elias Audi, the Ambassador reiterated USG support for a Lebanon free of foreign interference. Audi, more pessimistic than ever before with the Ambassador, related that many Lebanese fear a loss of international support, in particular due to speculation in the region that the international community may compromise Lebanon's sovereignty and interests to gain Syrian cooperation on regional issues. This fear and a coming Christian-Muslim split will compel many Christians to leave Lebanon. Michel Aoun and his followers have completely abandoned their principles and done an ideological about-face in an effort to ride Hizballah's power to the presidential palace. Hizballah, the real power in Lebanon, may be unstoppable; their numbers, money, arms, the Christian cover Aoun provides, and Nabih Berri's weakness allow Hizballah to dictate to other Lebanese parties without listening in turn. Meanwhile, of Greek Orthodox GOL figures, Ministers Mitri and Murr will remain in the cabinet, Audi presumes, while Minister Sarraf's departure was due to loyalty to President Lahoud; finally, the President holds the final say over Ambassador Chedid's taking up his post in Washington. End Summary.

LEBANON DOUBTS INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

¶2. (C) The Ambassador called on Greek Orthodox Bishop Metropolitan Elias Audi December 5. Polchief was notetaker. The appointment had been made almost two weeks earlier, before the beginning of the opposition March 8 movement's "sit-in" of Beirut's central Riad al-Solh Square. The Ambassador explained that he had made the appointment to dispel speculation then circulating in Beirut that USG support for the government of Prime Minister Siniora might be flagging in the context of regional issues. The Ambassador conveyed to Audi the Secretary's assurances that USG support for a Lebanon independent of Syrian interference remains strong and will not change, and that the USG will continue to hold Syria responsible for its behavior, including its behavior with regard to Lebanon.

¶3. (C) Audi replied that he had been hearing speculation that the USG might compromise its support for Lebanon's independence in the context of an opening to Syria to obtain

Damascus, support on other security issues in the region. There are also those who believe that the ongoing March 8 protests aimed at bringing down the Siniora government could not occur without a tacit USG approval. He said that he has been asked by people to convey to the Ambassador that the USG should pressure Syria not to interfere in Lebanon. It is painful to feel that people do not trust the United States, he added.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador noted that some Lebanese fear that the USG will "sell them out" to Damascus. There are also those who themselves want to turn back the clock to the days of Syrian occupation, and there are others who are confident of the USG commitment to Lebanon's independence but still try, for their own political ends, to convince others that we might compromise Lebanon. The Ambassador emphasized that Audi should not believe the rumors of a U.S. deal with Syria.

Audi responded that there are also Lebanese who fear that the world may view Lebanon as a perpetual theater of conflict and that the international community therefore dismisses Lebanon as a hopeless case.

¶5. (C) The Ambassador said that Hizballah is exploiting a mistaken perception that USG support for Lebanon is changing.

Audi agreed and said that he had heard some assert that the USG and the Israeli government could have destroyed Hizballah's weapons if they had wished to do so, but that they intentionally left Hizballah in a position to make trouble and destroy Lebanon's stability "because the Israeli plan is not yet completed." The Ambassador vigorously denied this and reiterated that the USG interest is in a stable, prosperous and independent Lebanon.

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CHRISTIANS TO FLEE

¶6. (C) Such pessimism is most marked among Christians, Audi asserted. Christians in general are afraid they will "lose" Lebanon, a Lebanon in which they are accustomed to great influence. They are afraid that they may end up being ruled by Shiites, he added. "Shiites will put their hand on Lebanon." Shiites can live from Iranian support, he said (and added that in doing so, they can continue to sustain a high birth rate) but Christians need economic stability and good jobs, have no outside source of income, and could be forced to emigrate in ever-greater numbers.

¶7. (C) The current tension will result in increased division between Christians and Muslims, he predicted. Factional leaders can disagree with each other, he said, but they should do it away from the public eye. Tension and fear will result in young people, especially Christians, fleeing the country. He gave the example of the Greek Orthodox Church school, in which 360 students were absent the previous day because their parents worried about political tensions.

AOUN

¶8. (C) Those following Aoun are following Aoun the man, Audi asserted, not any set of principles or ideology. "I don't think he has principles or ideology," he added, "but he's really just crazy about being president." While he is putting on a good appearance of building bridges to Shiites, he is not politically intelligent. He has no plan, and has nothing to offer in his speeches except criticism of other parties. Aoun has changed positions 180 degrees since his return from France. "I can't build on his position because I don't feel that he's handling the situation."

¶9. (C) The Ambassador agreed that it is amazing to see Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) supporters cheering Hizballah speakers in the square or for that matter, FPM leader and Aoun son-in-law Gebran Bassil raising hands in triumph with

pro-Syrian Druze opposition leader Talal Arslan. Audi confided to us (protect) that during a visit to the Bishop, Bassil argued to him that Hizballah is "pure and clean" and therefore worthy of support. Audi told Bassil that if he sought to convince him of this it was a sign that he did not respect Audi's intellect.

HIZBALLAH

¶10. (C) Hizballah, meanwhile, loves to have a Christian cover. They are the power in Lebanon, Audi said, but they don't want the world to see them taking over. "When I see the images on TV of protesters in central Beirut, I see Hizballah. They don't question anything" that Nasrallah tells them to do, and they will do anything he asks. Audi addressed this theme in a sermon, and received an unprecedented number of phone calls, he said, from Christians who thought he was talking about them, but it was Hizballah supporters he meant.

¶11. (C) Audi allowed that he was concerned about the future of Lebanon. "Hizballah won't go back; they're ascending, not descending, because of their arms, money and numbers." Their numbers are increasing, the army can't stop them, and alternate Shia leader Berri is completely intimidated by them. While Berri never had any affinity for Hizballah, he averred, "now his hand is forced." Even President Lahoud, as much as he is cursed by the Lebanese people, is in an unenviable position as Hizballah and Syria's proxy, as he is told to make each and every move that he makes.

¶12. (C) The Bishop added that Hizballah does not listen to other parties, but only threatens. He had heard a number of accounts of Shiites who felt too intimidated to express their concerns about Hizballah. Audi felt that having an interlocutor in the Shiite clergy who could reach Nasrallah might help, but interfaith dialogue efforts were stalled.

GREEK ORTHODOX FIGURES IN THE GOL

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¶13. (C) Audi speculated that former Environment Minister Yacoub Sarraf, a Greek Orthodox, had resigned from the cabinet in November because of loyalty to President Lahoud, who nominated him for the position when Siniora's cabinet was forming in 2005. Sarraf had visited his Bishop and sung the praises of Hizballah and Aoun, Audi recalled. Meanwhile, co-religionists and fellow Lahoud appointees Tariq Mitri (Culture Minister and acting Foreign Minister) and Elias Murr (Defense Minister and Deputy Prime Minister) appear committed to remain in the cabinet, Audi believed, despite Murr's frequent absence from cabinet meetings, which Audi attributed to health problems. Finally, Audi joined the Ambassador's hope that Greek Orthodox Ambassador Antoine Chedid, appointed Lebanese Ambassador to Washington, would be able to take up his new post soon, though he conditioned that "it depends on the President."

COMMENT

¶14. (C) The usually affable Audi was more depressed and pessimistic than we have seen him in the last two-plus years. Much of what he said echoes the convictions and fears of a growing number of Lebanese that the U.S. is about to sell out Lebanon to Syria in order to get Syria's support for Iraqi stability. At one point in the conversation, Audi, theatrically lifting his right arm off his chair, said that people believe that the U.S. has lifted the pressure off Syria and released the Syrians from the bind in which we had held them in recent years. That, Audi said, is the only way some people can explain the current March 8-Aoun demonstrations downtown, that the U.S. eased up on Syria.

While we believe we made inroads in convincing Audi that U.S. policy toward Syria and Lebanon has not changed, the debate over the Iraq Study Group recommendations could not be coming at a worse time for Lebanon's struggling pro-independence movement. The perception of changed U.S. policy is nearly as damaging as an actual change would be to the morale of March 14 leaders.

FELTMAN